Isolation and Awakening in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Kate Chopin's The Awakening, and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: The Path to Individual Truth

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Abstract

This project examines characters in literature that undergo a journey which separates them from society. Such a journey allows them to explore their needs and desires in an existential quest that ultimately allows them to recognize themselves as individuals. This journey follows a pattern of fall, renunciation, and redemption as seen in the story of Job. The thesis begins with a brief account of the spiritual crisis experienced by the Old Testament character Job. This well known story serves as a paradigm for the events that all of the protagonists to be discussed later experience and endure in order to attain greater self-understanding. Three novels that exemplify this spiritual and intellectual journey are discussed in independent chapters. The first chapter deals with Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. This is followed by a study of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's The Awakening. The third, and final, chapter explores Kurtz and Marlow in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

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Introduction

Crisis can often lead to contentment. By experiencing conflict and struggle created by human aspiration and societal demands, one is compelled to renounce earthly values and, in turn, discovers self-understanding and spiritual redemption. Human cultures suppress individual liberties by constraining the potential for independent thought and action. Social institutions set forth rules and regulations that reflect civilized behavior; religions define the limits of virtue and vise; laws protect the rights of its citizens and punish their offenders; society establishes its ideals, determines criteria for success, and sanctions those who do not meet its standards. Thus, one's reality becomes his interpretation of the world around him based on codes of behavior and morality defined by the community he resides in. In this environment, one will never know the liberation of determining his fate through choices based on a perspective of truth unbiased by the convictions of others. Instead, he accepts the path determined for him by a collective ideology. An important question emerges: how can one penetrate earthly illusions and values that obscure self-understanding to discover a deliverance from societal demands.

In the Book of Job, an upright, just man confronts this puzzle. Satan uses Job to persuade the Lord God of human fallibility. Faith and, by extension, the presence of God within human consciousness are tested. Jaweh allows Satan to afflict Job with all manner of misery, including the loss of all his property, family, and identity. This seemingly random punishment reflects and records Job's fall. The Lord, rather than protecting his loyal follower on a pedestal of prosperity, has adorned him with adversity. When Job's friends come to comfort him, he casts them off and questions the motives of a God who

would bring light to others while shrouding a devout servant in darkness. These questions are Job's renunciation of a culture that he once knew and accepted. He rejects those people with whom he once held counsel, and criticizes the faith that controlled his life. Already separated from the life he once lived by his fall, Job then isolates himself further from the ideas of the culture around him by severing his ties to the friends and faith that influence his thinking.

During his isolation, Job gains a new perspective on his former beliefs. He concludes that he must interpret God's will with his own reasoning rather than the interpretations of others. Secluded from the sway of societal beliefs, Job recognizes the importance of critical thinking and independence. When God challenges Job's faith, the fallen man expresses this enlightened view; and, having seen God through his own eyes, he repents. The Lord rewards his follower's answer by restoring Job's fortune, and by returning him to the pedestal of prosperity he formerly occupied in the land of Uz. For Job, though, the reward and benefits of society are meaningless. In suffering the loss of health and home, he has discovered a deliverance from societal expectations and has learned to enjoy a spiritual union with Jaweh. This is his redemption that is, in turn, a re-creation of the bliss in the Garden of Eden.

Liberty, then, may be found by looking beyond the surface reality imposed by social institutions and interpreting one's surroundings with his own principles. In the words of Milton, "the mind is its own place, and in its place may make a heaven of hell, or hell of heaven." The individual's search for "it's own place" is as distinct as every human's aspirations and ideals. Nevertheless, Job's fulfillment in his insight into the nature and role of Jaweh suggests a pattern of behavior: fall, renunciation, and

redemption. Satan conceived and carried out Job's expulsion from society. In remaining loyal to Jaweh, though, Job appreciates his relationship with the Almighty and thereby strengthens his faith that supercedes passing values associated with society's wealth and prestige. Such a renunciation of society is his redemption.

This paradigm of fall, renunciation, and redemption emerges throughout literature. In Dante's Divine Comedy, for example, Dante the Pilgrim witnesses the suffering of man's fall into sin, his renunciation of evil through a cleansing of corruption in Purgatory, and his eventual redemption in his unification with God. Such a pattern, however, is not necessarily theological. More recent writers have conveyed a similar vision, but instead of expressing this pilgrimage in terms of a parable to experience a human journey to God, they have centered attention upon an emotional torment that ends in rejection of societal standards. In brief, such a voyage becomes an existential quest.

Three nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century novels reflect this journey towards self-understanding and the associated deliverance: Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850), Kate Chopin's The Awakening (1899), and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902). Each of these novels varies in setting and perspective. The Puritan New England Hawthorne describes contrasts sharply with the Chopin's bourgeois late nineteenth-century New Orleans, and Conrad's colonial Africa. Further, Chopin's Edna Pontellier confronts the stark realities of conventionality and revolts against society to discover eventual peace. Hawthorne's Hester Prynne and Conrad's Kurtz, though, are protagonists described by third-person narrators. Hawthorne acts as a narrator, revealing the secrets of forgotten seventeenth-century documents while Conrad's Marlow analyzes the solitude and suffering of Kurtz, and eventually applies the lessons he learns during his

quest for this ivory trader to his own life. In spite of these differences though, a parallel theme exists between these works that is characterized by a transcendence of societal constraints. The theme of fall, renunciation, and redemption seems to define each of these psychological, existential journeys. Through an examination of this paradigm, this study will explore these distinct, but similar voyages which cast characters into suffering, and incite a rejection of the earthly and, at the same time, ensure a transcendence into insight and self-acceptance.

Chapter I: The Scarlet Letter

Puritan settlements in the New World were less than ideal sites for personal freedoms. The residents of these early American towns were subject to a strict code of conduct based on their religious leaders' interpretations of the Bible. Nathaniel Hawthorne chose this environment as the setting for his novel, The Scarlet Letter. Like Job, Hawthorne's heroine Hester Prynne undergoes a fall that isolates her from the society in which she lives. After renouncing the conservative behaviors and beliefs of her home, Hester finds her eyes open to an entirely new perspective on the world around her. This newfound understanding allows the fallen woman to redeem herself in the hearts and minds of the people who once scorned her for the sin she represents.

The stern character of Puritan Boston is described in the opening passages of Hawthorne's writing. He describes the grave approach early residents of this New England town took to sentencing and enforcing their laws with the following portrayal of a crowd outside the local jail waiting for a prisoner to come forth:

> Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful business in hand. It could have betokened nothing short of the anticipated execution of some noted culprit, on whom the sentence of a legal tribunal had but confirmed the verdict of public sentiment. But, in that early severity of Puritan character, an inference of this kind could not so indubitably be drawn. It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child, whom his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the

> whipping-post...there was very much the same solemnity of demeanor on the part of the spectators; as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful. (Hawthorne, 47)

This passage describes several aspects of the lives and dispositions of the masses in Hawthorne's tale. First, these people are stoical. The line illustrating "the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies" of the townsfolk brings to mind images of the chiseled, granite statues of Norse gods or the bare face of a rugged cliff. This description paints the portrait of people who have been hardened by the harsh seasons, and rocky coastline of the shores on which they have settled. These people are so austere that the faces they show at a public execution are indistinguishable from their visages when a youth is being whipped for disobedience.

Additionally, the excerpt shows the importance of religion in these people's lives. Crimes in this society do not merely represent an act that endangers oneself or others; they are transgressions against the will of God. The residents of Boston are described as "a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical." The separation between Church and State is nonexistent; there are no differences between civil and canonical crimes; every wrong represents a sin.

Not only are religion and law tantamount, there is little differentiation in the public opinion with regard to the severity of an offense since, "the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful." Little difference exists between stealing a loaf of bread to feed one's family and robbing the bank to make

a quick dollar in the minds of the spectators at this event. Just as they exhibit limited variation in features between executions and whippings, the masses feel no greater sympathy for a small infraction than they do for a great one. This environment hardly allows for independent thought or action. The strict beliefs of Puritan culture leave little room for interpretation. A person either follows the stern code of behavior set down by the Church, or learns a lesson in repentance that leaves little doubt about proper behavior.

The words of the women waiting outside the prison door for Hester Prynne to exit further demonstrate the fervor with which members of this community embrace their way of life. One might think that the ladies of the town would have some sympathy for a woman such as Hester whose husband sent her to a foreign shore alone, and has not contacted her in years. However, the women in the crowd outside Boston's jailhouse speak the most hateful words of anyone there. "If the hussy stood up for judgement before us five," they say, "that are now here in a know together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow now!" (Hawthorne, 48). The punishment of wearing a brand that forever reminds any passersby of the sins Hester Prynne has committed is too lenient in their minds. They argue for a more stringent sentence: "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead" (Hawthorne, 49). These remarks show little compassion for a woman whose only sin was to be unfaithful to a husband who seemingly abandoned her in a harsh, far-off land. Rather, the matrons' comments represent a tireless adherence to the religious principles their community was founded on, and they reflect the pressure placed upon anyone who defies or bends these laws. Through her sin, Hester has fallen in the eyes of these people.

Hester Prynne represents someone who has broken the laws of Boston and God. She committed adultery, and regardless of the circumstances she will pay penance for her sin because the community will allow nothing less. Her fall is, paradoxically, displayed to the public by an ascent onto the scaffolding at the town's center. Here, with a scarlet letter on her breast and a babe in her arms to remind the crowds of the sin she has committed, Hester must stand under the strict gazes of the townsfolk. Hawthorne captures the goal of Prynne's punishment writing, "There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature, whatever be the delinquencies of the individual, no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do" (53). The penalty of standing on the pillory before the eyes of all that care to look leaves the sinner's transgressions displayed to all. Like a dreamer who confronts some nighttime terror and finds himself unable to turn and run, the soul sentenced to ascend the pillory must face the mortification of being unable to hide himself from the contemptuous stares of one's peers.

Further evidence of Hester's fall can be found throughout the novel. A fissure opens between the adulterer and the rest of society. According to Hawthorne:

> In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind. (78)

The bearer of the scarlet letter now finds herself segregated from humanity. Contact with other human beings serves only to remind her of the isolation she now experiences. The Puritans of Boston do not simply look down on Hester; they view her as though she "inhabited another sphere." The public does not act as if she *belongs* in another world. Instead, they treat her as if she *lives* in a different land, as though she does not dwell in the same plane of reality as they do. To them, Hester no longer exists, only the sin she represents continues to thrive. She is becoming completely cut-off from society.

On another occasion, Hester Prynne is referred to as "alone in the world, cast off by it" (Hawthorne, 103). Later, Hawthorne writes, "All the world had frowned on her, – for seven long years had it frowned upon this lonely woman" (178). The references to a "lonely woman" who is "alone in the world" further illustrate the degree to which Hester's fall separates her from the stern culture of New England. The world has "cast off" her ties. The woman no longer has any links to the Puritan environment that has blanketed her for so long. Hester goes on to show that this isolation allows her to think and act of her own accord, providing her with a level of freedom which eventually leads to revelations about both herself, and the world that has cast her off.

Not only does the community sever its ties to Hester following her fall, the young woman also turns her back on the people of Boston and their beliefs. The first evidence of Hester's choice to abandon Puritan values shows itself when she is questioned upon the pillory regarding the identity of her lover. According to the townsfolks' faith, hiding the identity of one's partner in a sin such as adultery only tempts them to commit further offenses. Reverend Dimmesdale's plea, "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him–yea, compel him, as it were–to add hypocrisy to sin?" expresses this tenet

(Hawthorne, 63). Refusing to name one's partner in sin leads only to further transgressions, and the responsibility for such misdeeds lies largely with the one who refuses to name her accomplice. By choosing not to reveal her lover, Hester renounces both Puritan faith and New England culture.

In spite of the danger Puritan beliefs insist refusing to speak poses to both her own soul and that of her partner, the bearer of the scarlet letter does not reveal her lover's name. "I will not speak!" she cries out, "And my child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!" (Hawthorne, 64). This exclamation represents more than just a stubborn nature; this is the first time Hester openly renounces her faith. In doing so, she shows a willingness to find her own path in life rather than follow that which others mark out for her. This is an important step in coming to the realizations that will lead to her eventual redemption.

Hester Prynne's choice of living quarters provides more evidence of her renunciation of New England society. Although Hester chooses not to flee the land that has punished her, she does set herself apart from it to some degree. Hawthorne describes the cottage that this woman lives in after her release from prison as "on the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to other habitation...its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of that social activity which already marked the habits of the emigrants" (74). This passage makes an important point about Hester's residence. The cabin, located in the outer confines of the town, sits outside the influence of "social activity." Hester chooses to live in a place where she will be minimally influenced by the thoughts and actions of the rest of the

world. Here, she may exist entirely by her own devices. Hester may contemplate her situation freely, without the influence of Boston's stern beliefs.

Isolated from the constraints imposed by living in such a stern culture through the public's disdain and her own rejection of the local beliefs, Hawthorne's protagonist experiences liberation from the shackles of the community's austere approach to life. Like Job, Hester Prynne contemplates new ideas, which would never have occurred to her were she not removed from the general populace by her fall. Hawthorne describes this emancipation writing,

> Alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to consider it desirable, – she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind...In her lonesome cottage, by the shore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England. (151)

This passage describes the effect of solitude on Hester. The "fragments of a broken chain" she casts off symbolize the confinement of New England's puritanical ideology. The line "the world's law was no law for her mind" illustrates her abandonment of this faith's doctrines, which allows her to experience thoughts that "dare to enter no other dwelling in New England." The loneliness of Hester's expulsion from society provides her with a freedom of intellect that cannot be found in a culture governed by a rigid belief system. However, it proves difficult to accept thoughts that challenge the convictions to which the scarlet letter's bearer has been subject so long.

At first, Hester's thoughts frighten her. She begins to believe that bearing the scarlet letter gives her the power to recognize hidden sins in the hearts of others. This

notion both bewilders and disturbs the woman. She considers the strange impulses she feels in the following:

> Could they be other than the insidious whispers of the bad angel, who would fain have persuaded the struggling woman, as yet only half his victim, that the outward guise of purity was but a lie, and that, if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne's? (Hawthorne, 80).

Understandably, the notion that every soul toils under the burden of hidden sins is disquieting to a woman who has spent so much time in an environment where righteousness is paramount. The level of hypocrisy suggested by this thought on the part of the community is somewhat overwhelming for Hester. If, in fact, the masses which gaze at the scarlet letter with virtuous disdain for the crime it represents conceal equal or greater offenses on their own part, then the entire system of faith upon which the colony bases its laws and lifestyle is a merely a pretense. Isolated from the bonds of this system, Hester has difficulty in accepting such new unconstrained thoughts.

As time progresses, Hester Prynne challenges other aspects of colonial moral principles. She questions life as a woman in a system where the lady's role is to be seen and not heard, to serve her husband obediently and work diligently without the benefits of property, wealth, political influence, or an equal level of respect to what men receive for leading an honest, upright existence. She wonders,

> Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. A tendency to speculation,

> though it may keep woman quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (Hawthorne, 152)

Hester ponders whether living as a woman in a society that must be so radically changed before equality would exist is worth the effort. She realizes that, in addition to restructuring society itself, the intrinsic tendency of men to suppress women will have to be altered before parity between the sexes could arise in a public setting.

This notion disturbs Hester, showing that she has not yet become comfortable with the feeling of independent thoughts that are skeptical of the society to which she so recently belonged. The "tendency to speculation" Hawthorne points out "makes her sad." The effect of autonomy, such a new experience to one used to life in an environment where thoughts are prepackaged in a reverend's sermon, is still disturbing to Hester. In spite of her renunciation of society, and the scorn with which the population looks down on her, Hester has not entirely lost the sensibilities of her previous life. Hawthorne remarks that "The scarlet letter had not yet done its office" (152). The magistrates intended the red symbol on Hester's bosom to serve as a symbol, reminding all those who encounter the woman that she has sinned and should be shunned. This, however, is not the "office" to which Hawthorne refers. While the letter indeed serves to separate its bearer from society, the effect of that isolation in this context is autonomy. Hawthorne's

"office" alludes to the liberty that comes with unconstrained thought, a level of freedom that Hester has not yet reached. While she questions the beliefs and practices of the world to which she once belonged, the melancholy this challenge brings makes her wonder whether she should even exist. Thus, the bonds are broken, but the slave has not been fully liberated. In time, however, Hester learns to completely embrace the independence afforded her by the scarlet letter.

Hester's enlightenment does eventually reach the level of freedom allowed by the scarlet letter. In time, she learns to accept her isolation, as well as the level of introspection that independence allows. The woman learns to accept new ideas, and criticize the wrongs she sees in society without ever doubting herself. The effect of Hester's years spent separated from the influence of the public's beliefs and laws is clear:

> For years past she looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators have established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other woman dared not tread. (Hawthorne, 183)

She now freely condemns practices of the pillars of New England communities, challenging the church while renouncing the reverends' decree of God's will and magistrates' laws. Hester freely chastises the two entities which create structure and constraint in society. Like the native peoples, who hold no ties to Christian faith or laws, she does all this without remorse or doubt regarding her soul's future.

This lack of regret shows that the scarlet letter has served its true purpose. Hester has been completely cut off from culturally imposed constraints on her thinking. This symbol of sin serves as a "passport," a device that enables its carrier to reach new territories of logic and contemplation. The regions this badge opens up to exploration are not of the earth, they are realms of the intellect. Hester understands the value of critical thinking. The ability to question any device that potentially intrudes on her autonomy and equality represents the greatest freedom she can have amongst a people who follow their leaders words without thought or reservation because they are told that any less would place one's soul in eternal jeopardy. This realization reflects Hester Prynne's redemption.

With Hester's emancipation comes a certain level of acceptance from the populace. As the scarlet letter's bearer becomes comfortable with her experiences, and the criticisms she develops about the world's wrongs, she devotes herself to comforting her fellow man during times of tragedy. Hawthorne writes, "Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one...Such helpfulness was found in her, – so much power to do, and power to sympathize that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able" (148). Hester's years of suffering and humiliation have made her an excellent shoulder to cry on. Her understanding of human suffering, and realizations of society's injustice have lent her a great degree of sympathy for those in pain. In so doing, the public's harsh treatment of Hester gives way to compassion for her devotion to easing the suffering of others. Like Job, Hester is redeemed in the world that had forsaken her because of the increased awareness she has gained from isolation from this environment.

Instead of averting their eyes, or viewing the scarlet letter with disdain, the people of Boston begin to see the red A and its host as a blessing. People say to strangers "Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge?...It is our Hester, – the town's own Hester, who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted" (Hawthorne, 149). The populace learns to look beyond the sins of Hester's past and accept her for the acts of charity she commits. Townsfolk who once thought Hester deserved a more stringent punishment for transgressions against not just her husband, but the word of God, now cite her as an example of virtue. Hester's toils and experiences in loneliness have brought her redemption through the sympathy she shows for fellow sufferers.

The ultimate representation of Hester's absolution can be found in the final pages of Hawthorne's novel. After leaving New England for some time, the scarlet letter and its charge return to their former home. To her cottage "people brought all their sorrows and complexities, and besought her counsel, as one who herself had gone through a mighty trouble" (Hawthorne, 239). The town goes beyond simply praising Hester's good deeds by seeking her out as a confidant in calamity. The woman, once disdained and avoided, becomes a means of consoling all who tread outside the bounds of acceptance or happiness in New England. Her unique perspective, gained through years of suffering in isolation, makes her able like none other to sympathize and support those in need.

Interestingly, Hester's redemption places her in a position that enables her to spread her criticisms of society to the public with honor rather than subjugation. The streams of women who come to the scarlet letter's bearer for advice on their wretched lives provide an enthusiastic audience for the challenge to women's roles in the world

that once disturbed Hester. In response to the questions of these throngs of distressed women, Hester "assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (Hawthorne, 239). Thus, the questions which once created so much doubt in Hester, have now been answered. Furthermore, she feels comfortable enough to express her revelations to the world who's abandonment allowed these queries to be realized and contemplated. The scarlet letter has "done its office." Hester Prynne's redemption is evidence of the independence that she gained through years of separation from the influences and constraints of society.

Chapter II: The Awakening

Like Hester Prynne, Edna Pontellier undergoes a journey involving isolation from a controlling society, renunciation of the world to which she once belonged, and a series of revelations leading to redemption. The protagonist from Kate Chopin's The Awakening struggles in a world where women are second class citizens, and yearns to find new ways of expressing herself. The truths that Edna discovers, however, lead her to a conclusion quite different than that of Hester.

To a Creole in the early 1900's, a woman is similar to an investment. She should be looked after and cared for, but she is a property that has specific purposes. Her rights are limited; she has a distinct place in society; when a woman steps outside these bounds she needs a reminder of her role. Edna Pontellier inhabits this world, and, in spite of a more northern background than the other characters of Kate Chopin's story, Edna receives little latitude from the expectation of any other Creole man's wife.

Early in her novel, Chopin makes her protagonist's position quite clear. When Mrs. Pontellier's husband sees her coming from the beach in the afternoon he comments, "You are burnt beyond recognition" which of itself could simply show concern, but the author goes on to describe him as "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (7). This description paints Edna as an object in her husband's eyes. His concern seems less for her well being than the loss of value she will undergo as a result of some defect.

Léonce Pontellier's censure of his wife for disagreeing with him over what he believes to be a fever in one of their children further indicates his wife's expected role: "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it

was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (Chopin, 13). Again, there seems to be some level of concern in Léonce's actions for the well being of his family, but simultaneously he indicates that Edna should serve a particular purpose which is expected by society. In this case, she should be looking after the children; this is her "place" and her current level of enthusiasm for the job is not satisfactory to her husband.

One might wonder why Mr. Pontellier himself does not attend to his children's perceived needs. Chopin also explains this: "He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once: making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way" (13). This excerpt states the man's role in southern culture. The husband provides money to put food on the table and to keep the house warm. Thus, he cannot be counted upon for domestic affairs since the strain might impair his ability to serve as the breadwinner. The last sentence about Mr. Pontellier's "monotonous, insistent" manner of pointing out his part in the family indicates that this principle is a memorized part of life. He repeats it as though rehearsing lines for a play that does not really interest him. Such monotony implies a level of recitation, and such insistence gives an "it has always been this way and nobody else is complaining, why can't you see that?" quality to the speech. In this culture, the wife watches the children and serves as an object for her spouse's affection.

Chopin provides additional evidence of a lady's role in New Orleans society through her description of the women who stay at a summer resort with the Pontelliers. Chopin writes, "They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their

husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (16). The description of Edna's peers emphasizes the matriarch's capacity as a caretaker for her children and as a form of support for her husband. For mothers in this circle, sacrificing (or "effacing") one's personal thoughts and desires for the good of her family gains the greatest esteem. Like the Puritans of New England, women in New Orleans are expected to serve. Hester was expected to answer to the Lord, while southern culture requires Edna to satisfy her family's wishes.

This atmosphere of expectation is stifling to Edna. She finds the role of a traditional wife burdensome and disheartening. The effect of being immersed in such an environment produces "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (Chopin, 14). Mrs. Pontellier finds herself restricted by the world around her. This feeling of constraint leads to a sensation of torment arising from a part of her being that she has never realized. The stirrings of this slumbering self represent the beginnings of Edna's fall.

Mr. Pontellier's unhappiness with his wife's domestic performance has already been discussed. This represents a part of the woman's descent from social graces, at least in the mind of her husband. As his wife begins to spend time painting rather than pampering her children, Léonce again reproaches her saying, "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (Chopin, 95). Mr. Pontellier's statement demonstrates his feeling that Edna has not been performing her expected duties. Her status as a wife has diminished, and thus her place in

society has been lowered. In fact, Léonce believes his spouse has slipped so far that professional help should be sought.

On his way to work one morning, Mr. Pontellier visits his old family doctor, a man by the name of Mandelet, to express his concern for Edna's behavior. When asked to describe how his wife has been acting strangely, or whether she has been associating with a new crowd, Léonce replies, "she hasn't been associating with any one. She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street cars, getting in after dark. I tell you she's peculiar. I don't like it" (Chopin, 110). To consult a doctor at all demonstrates Edna's fall in her husband's eyes, but Mr. Pontellier does not stop at this. He lists several of the infractions he feels his wife has committed against an acceptable code of behavior. Edna no longer belongs to the world of Creole New Orleans; her actions suggest that she has slipped into some other realm of existence. Mrs. Pontellier's transgression relates to unspoken social expectations. She, like Hester Prynne, has done wrong in the eyes of her peers.

One of the chief reasons for Edna's decision to abandon the behavioral codes that rule her environment is her growing fascination for young Robert Lebrun. The woman spends much of her time at the resort on Grand Isle with this New Orleans native. She grows accustomed to his company, and feels affection for him that she does not fully realize until he leaves for Mexico: "For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman" (Chopin, 75). Mrs. Pontellier's fall, like Hester's, is the act of falling in love. The passions that slumbered deep in her soul since adolescence have been

rekindled for this charming young man. Yet, in a society where a wife's obedience and adoration of her husband are an unspoken code, Edna's fondness for Robert represents a breach of propriety. This is an offense against not just Léonce, but the entire Creole lifestyle.

By indulging in these personal desires rather than following the traditional path of a wife, Edna frees herself of bonds created by expectation and classical belief systems. Unlike Hester Prynne, whose isolation from society is largely imposed by others through her sentencing, Edna Pontellier creates her own seclusion from societal constraints. Chopin's description of Edna's feelings during a short trip away from her husband and Grand Isle with Robert portrays this release: "Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening... leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails" (58). Being removed from a world filled with roles and unspoken rules fills Edna with the sensation of a ship leaving harbor. With Robert by her side, she sets sail, leaving behind the ropes that tied her down. The allusion to a sea-going vessel plays a great role in establishing the exhilaration of this experience for Mrs. Pontellier.

Chopin suggests this tie between Edna and the sea throughout the novel. Early in the story, the water's "voice" is described as "seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in inward mazes of contemplation" (Chopin, 25). The ocean, like a siren's song calls Edna to dive in and to find her own identity by leaving the rest of the world behind. To so completely succumb to her innermost thoughts and aspirations would

embody the ultimate rejection of the position Mrs. Pontellier occupies in society as a wealthy Creole's wife.

Thus, Edna's first swim symbolizes the beginning of her true renunciation of society. Before this point in her life, Edna has filled the role of a mother and loving wife. All this time "A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her" (Chopin, 47). Filling the part Fate dealt her in society, Edna never knew the joy of swimming. She would not feel at ease without another's presence nearby. As an individual she could not stay afloat. The summer on Grand Isle though, has taught her to enjoy independence; Robert has served as an emancipator.

The sea's song calls strongly to this woman, telling her not to ignore it any longer. When Edna finally manages to swim on her own, her first solitary trip into the ocean fills her with "A feeling of exultation...as if some power of significant import had been given over to control the working of her body and soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin, 47). Immersing herself in the "abysses of solitude," Mrs. Pontellier obtains a hunger to transcend the traditions that have kept women from immersing themselves in introspection. She yearns to know life as an individual, to live according to her own beliefs and caprices. Edna desires emancipation from a world that suppresses a woman's right to exist as a man's equal rather than his possession.

To attain this level of independence, Edna must renounce the values held by her husband's culture. Her first direct reproach of the Creole life comes as a statement of independence. In a discussion with her friend Madame Ratignolle, Edna states, "I would

give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin, 80). The wife's duty as a protective angel for her children has already been discussed. This aspect of motherhood represents one of the most important qualities a woman may possess. In a sense, Edna accepts this duty since she admits she would sacrifice her life to protect them, but she asserts that she would not give *herself.* While she would give her life for her children, Edna will not relinquish the individuality and developing ability to express herself that makes her different from the other mothers at Grand Isle. She places too high a price on this liberty to relinquish it, no matter the cost. This statement demonstrates Enda's awakening from the dark slumber of tradition.

Edna's decision to leave her husband's house after returning to the city and live in a smaller "pigeon house" that she can rent with her own money further demonstrates her renunciation of a matriarch's role in New Orleans society. When asked why she is leaving her old house, Edna replies, "The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine" meaning they belong to her husband (Chopin, 132). This bothers Edna because she feels that living with Léonce's support, amongst his property, makes her as much a possession as the house and its furnishings. Chopin explains the woman's desire to find her own home, for "she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (133). Edna craves independence; as long as she surrounds herself with Mr. Pontellier's belongings; she will always be dependent upon him. In this environment, she remains subject to the expectations of her husband because he owns her just as much as the house. So Edna finds her own home, and distances herself from the traditional role of a wife in the hopes that it will allow her to live as an individual. Just as Hester Prynne chooses a

dwelling outside the realm of influence of Puritan thought, Edna removes herself from her husband's support and family's demands by renting the pigeon house.

Edna's isolation and increasing self-reliance provide her with a perspective on life that has never been available to her. Freeing herself from other's ideas allows her to look more deeply into herself. Chopin describes this transition when she writes,

> There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. (Chopin, 156)

As Edna rejects the various ideals of her husband's culture, she descends from the pedestal of a wife and gravitates towards the status of an individual. Casting aside the world's expectations, she finds herself increasingly able to perceive and understand the events around her. The awakening continues.

More evidence of the liberation Edna gains by tossing aside societal expectations is provided in a description of Edna's state of mind the night she decided to move to the pigeon house: "She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (Chopin, 140). This excerpt raises two important points about Edna's growing self-awareness. First, isolating herself from the ideas of the world around her allows this woman to perceive life in an unrestricted manner that she could never imagine before her fall and renunciation. Second, Edna recognizes that existence is marked by both joys and

sorrows. She harbors no illusions regarding life's tendency to bring anguish just as readily as bliss. This recognition becomes important later in the story.

Before a discussion of the relevance of Edna's revelation, it should be pointed out that, like Hester, Mrs. Pontellier's increased self-awareness brings her a level of redemption from the society she has abandoned. Shortly after the Pontelliers' return to New Orleans for the winter, Edna visits the Lebrun's home in the city. After Edna's departure, Victor responds to a remark made by his mother about Mrs. Pontellier's beauty saying, "Ravishing! The city atmosphere has improved her. Some way she doesn't seem the same woman" (Chopin, 102). Victor probably does not comprehend the truth of his assessment. In many respects, Edna has become a different woman since the summer began at Grand Isle. No longer trying to live up to other people's ideas of what a mother and wife should be, Edna now finds her own way in life. Her burgeoning independence, rather than the city atmosphere has improved her. Despite missing the cause of Edna's change, the Lebrun's praise of the woman's radiance demonstrates a level of progress in their eyes. This adulation shows that Edna occupies an elevated position in the minds of her peers as a result of the satisfaction that she gains from understanding herself and the liberation from the influence of society's beliefs.

The dinner party Edna hosts before moving into the pigeon house provides another example of the benefits she receives from society by learning to express herself as an individual. The event marks Mrs. Pontellier's last evening in her husband's home, and serves as a celebration of her decision to move into her own house. Thus, the dinner becomes a festival of Edna's independence

Edna's appearance at the festivities illustrates the positive effects living by her own devices has upon her. According to Chopin, "There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (148). In this case, to "stand alone" symbolizes Edna's disavowal of her husband's support as well as the choice to live according to her own beliefs and resources. The independence she gains as a result gives her the appearance of a queen. In controlling her own life, and shedding the restraints placed upon her freedom by the traditional role of a wife, Edna reaches a level of confidence that displays itself to others as regal. This air of nobility depicts redemption. After all, one can hardly consider a woman fallen when she is regarded highly enough to be compared to majesty.

Like Hester Prynne, Edna's renunciation of the society that scorned her has provided the fallen woman with a unique perspective. Just as Hester's isolation teaches her lessons on the suffering of women and so-called sinners in Puritan New England, Edna's separation from New Orleans has taught her the oppression with which Creole culture smothers the individuality of women. While Hester's insight leads to redemption through her increased ability to comfort others, Edna's understanding of the exhilarating feeling of independence enables her to act without concern for other's expectations. The empowerment that Edna receives through abandoning societal expectations places her in the role of a woman who leads. This position, so rare around the turn of the century in the south, elevates Edna in the eyes of her peers. She receives redemption because the people around her marvel at a display of independence not normally seen in a woman.

In spite of the freedom that Mrs. Pontellier gains by moving to the pigeon house and therefore separating herself from the possessive character associated with Léonce's support, she continues to hold one strong tie to the world's attitudes and beliefs. This bond corresponds to the love she feels for Robert Lebrun. Although her time with Robert at Grand Isle is largely responsible for the transformation she has undergone, Edna's love indicates a dependence on him. She cannot lose herself in the "inward maze of contemplation" suggested by the sea's expanses if she holds onto another person. The disappointment Edna expresses when Robert returns to New Orleans without visiting her indicates her reliance on him: "Each morning she awoke with hope, and each night she was a prey to despondency. She was tempted to seek him out" (Chopin, 172). Edna longs to spend time with Robert. Without him she takes on a melancholy mood. Such desire for another's company requires a level of dependence upon that person's presence. As long as this need remains, Edna cannot truly be her own woman. She still depends on the support of a man beside her.

Ironically, the affection for Lebrun that constrains Mrs. Pontellier springs largely from his role in opening her eyes to the world. "I love you," she tells him, "only you, no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream" (Chopin, 179). Robert, the instrument of her liberation, the man who roused her from slumber so that she could recognize the chains placed upon her by Léonce, New Orleans, and the Creole culture, is her love. To love someone requires sacrificing one's own personality to become united. Thus, as long as Mrs. Pontellier cherishes Robert, she will never feel the freedom of standing completely alone; she cannot succeed in freeing herself from the influence or support of the world.

In the end, Edna never decides to throw off her ties to Robert. In fact, she believes he will give himself up to her, and relinquish his own independence so that she may possess him the way Léonce once owned her. Edna "could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one. His expression of love had already given him in part to her" (Chopin, 185). Desiring both her own freedom and the love of Robert, she wants to turn around the traditional male-female roles so that she may keep both. Since Lebrun has professed his love, thereby articulating a dependence on Edna, she believes he will give himself completely to her. What Edna forgets is that she has also expressed her own adoration to Robert, thus giving a part of herself to him.

Perhaps realizing that Edna will never be happy without the complete liberation of thought and expression afforded by solitude, Robert breaks the bond between himself and Edna. Leaving a note that reads "I love you. Good-by–because I love you" (Chopin, 185). The reason Lebrun provides for his departure reflects a level of self-sacrafice, for "because I love you" indicates that he chooses this course for Edna's good rather than his own. Robert feels that severing the ties between himself and Mrs. Pontellier will allow the freedom she needs to be truly independent and happy.

By returning to Grand Isle Edna demonstrates the freedom that complete solitude gives her. Before stepping into the water for a swim, Edna stops on the shore. There "beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, prickling garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her" (Chopin, 189). This action symbolizes her complete removal from society's influences. Now, without a tie to her husband, friends, or Robert, Edna is completely alone. This isolation gives her the

freedom to stand before the world as an individual. Shedding her clothes, she removes the last vestiges of social expectation and ritual. Chopin writes, "She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (189). Devoid of the illusions placed upon her by other people's thoughts and ideas, Edna awakens to see the world not as a dream crafted from unconscious influences, but rather as the earth truly appears. For the first time in her life, she perceives the surroundings completely through her own senses and interprets these visions without the bias of society. This represents Edna's true redemption. She realizes the principles and practices of New Orleans are not necessary to her. Only her indep

Edna steps into the sea and answers the call that she heard a summer before: that invitation to the soul "to wander far a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (Chopin, 25). Diving into the ocean, Edna swims out beyond the point of exhaustion. She plunges into the water that has beckoned her with the promise of understanding. In her new state of self-awareness, she experiences revelations regarding the true meaning of freedom made possible by her complete rejection of the society that constrained her with ideas of propriety and a woman's role. She sees the world not through the surreal perspective of a dreamer, but as an individual who interprets what she sees free from the influence of others. This represents Edna's true redemption. She realizes the principles and practices of New Orleans are not necessary to her, only her independence matters. The trappings of wealth and culture are meaningless to Edna if she must live in a role created by societal expectations rather than as an independent being.

Edna's final action provides a contrast between herself and Hester Prynne. Hester eventually returns to the society that she abandoned in order to help other townsfolk who have suffered. The sympathy and insight her isolation have given her regarding the oppression of Puritan society enable Hester to console others who undergo hardship. Thus, Hester's fall and renunciation of Puritan culture lead to redemption through the understanding she gains while isolated from others' interpretations of truth. Edna, on the other hand, turns her back entirely on the society that oppressed her individuality. The journey she undergoes after renouncing the world teaches her that true freedom can come only by release from the dreamlike influence of others. To remove the mist of sleep from her eyes, she eventually chooses to separate herself entirely from Creole culture. Therefore, Edna's final redemption comes not from the society around her, but through an acceptance of herself demonstrated by her choice to abandon entirely a life ruled by the expectations of others.

Chapter III: Heart of Darkness

Marlow, the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, also undergoes a spiritual journey in which separation from society leads to revelations about both himself, and the nature of a culture that he has rejected. Assigned to captain a steamer in the heart of Africa, Marlow finds himself cut off from the oppressive environment of Europe. To find his own identity, he discovers he must reject the ideas and practices of imperialistic Western societies. Unlike characters such as Hester Prynne and Edna Pontellier, however, Marlow learns many of his lessons from observing the effects of isolation on another individual. Through his study of Kurtz, Marlow realizes both the benefits and dangers of releasing one's mind entirely from the restraints imposed by the world around him.

Like Job, Hester, and Edna, Marlow lives in an oppressive environment that influences an inhabitant's ability to determine his own path in life. Conrad wastes little time in painting a vivid picture of his hero's surroundings. In a description of the view up the Thames, River Conrad writes, "The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest town on earth" (15). This excerpt depicts cities as surrounded by dreary clouds, almost as if they deprive light from the skies. The "greatest town on earth" seems to refer to London, as would be seen looking up the river beyond Gravesend.

Given that the tale is set during the height of imperialism, London would indeed be one of busiest and most influential cities in the world. Thus, one might expect Britain's capital to appear as a hub of activity, rather than a dark blotch on the horizon.

Instead of vibrance, a "mournful gloom, brooding motionless" hangs over the center of the largest empire in the world. This hardly conveys a sense of prosperity with the city. Rather, the portrayal implies a dimness hanging about the town. Without light, one must stumble about as if in a fog, lurching forward in blind faith that he is pointed in the right direction and hardly able to perceive the dynamics of his surroundings

To add to this dismal portrayal of European civilization, Marlow recounts his arrival into the city which houses the headquarters of the Belgian trading company that gives him command of a steamship on an African river. Marlow says, "I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre" (Conrad, 24). In comparing the Belgian port with a crypt, Marlow creates an association of this society with death. He strengthens the link when he describes the street on which the company's offices are located: "a narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones" (Conrad, 24). The deserted street indicates a lack of inhabitants, and the "dead" silence implies a total lack of life; not even a rat can be heard scurrying down the gutter in search of food. The grass sprouting between the stones bears an uncanny resemblance to the description of Marlow's dead predecessor: "the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones" (Conrad, 24). All of these allusions to death housed inside a city compared to a sepulcher make the town seem more like a tomb than a bustling center for trade and exploration. Additionally, the "innumerable windows with venetian blinds" indicate that, while people have ample opportunity to look outside their homes and offices at the broader scope of existence, they chose instead to darken their windows to the world around them. This does not represent an environment where independence and

freethinking are valued. The city seems to drive its populace more towards the eternal sleep represented by death than the type of awakening already discussed with Edna Pontellier. In short, this society stifles the ability to exist as an individual.

Marlow's account of two women inside the door of the trading company strengthens the oppressive mood created by such dismal imagery. He says, "Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black-wool" (Conrad, 24). The look the older lady gives him and a pair of youngsters in the room gives him the suspicion that this woman "seemed to know all about them and about me too...She seemed uncanny and fateful" (Conrad, 24). These two women represent two of the three Fates of Greek mythology, who spin the thread that determines each man's destiny. One of the Fates, Lachesis is old and fat, while another, Clotho, is generally depicted as young and beautiful. The added statement that older woman seems to "know all about" Marlow and the two youths adds more evidence that this passage is an allusion to the Fates since they are able to read the events that occur on each thread they weave. Finally, the use of the word "fateful" to describe this knitter implies a direct reference to the Fates. Thus, the trading company's headquarters houses women who represent the notion that a man's destiny cannot be changed through his own actions; life and death are predetermined. This is just another example of an environment which suppresses free will by controlling the beliefs and actions of those who dwell within it.

Marlow's journey to enlightenment follows a slightly different order of events than that of Hester, and Edna. Since his position as a steamer captain removes him from humanity in a socially acceptable manner, he begins to recognize the world's fallacies before undergoing any fall. Aboard the French vessel that takes him from Europe to

Africa, Marlow comments on a warship they pass which is firing volleys into the jungle at no apparent target. Marlow asserts that every time a shell is fired "nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight" (Conrad, 31). A fellow passenger's comment that the jungle hides a "camp of natives" who are "enemies" does little to soothe his audience. Marlow, now removed from the European world by hundreds of miles, begins to criticize the ideas of his former home. To other passengers, the warship is firing at enemies, but Marlow sees action as more of a window-dressing than an effective style of combat. His growing isolation from the world allows him to think critically about its ideas and practices; he has begun to renounce society. This also marks the beginning of his renunciation of Western thinking.

To increase his separation from European culture, Marlow turns to his work once he arrives at the trading company's main station on the river in Africa. In the following passage, Marlow explains his decision to spend time alone repairing his steamer rather than talking with the other characters at the trading post: "I don't like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work, – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means" (Conrad, 52). This passage describes the effect of solitude on the mind. Although Marlow does not enjoy the toil of his labors, he finds that the time he spends working by himself allows him to understand his own desires and place in the world a little better. Immersed in his work, away from the influence of other people's beliefs, he recognizes his true self.

Marlow's time alone also allows him to recognize the true purpose of the trading company. While representatives may speak loftily of improving the world, spreading knowledge, and exploring new lands, the people in this organization want "to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land...with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (Conrad, 55). Europeans on this river are there to make a fortune selling ivory. They have no higher, ethical purpose; the traders are little more than thieves. Thus, like Hester and Edna, Marlow's isolation gives him a new perspective into the workings of society.

This revelation leads Marlow to wonder what would happen to a man who came into the wilderness with some sort of principles. Kurtz, the man Marlow has been assigned to seek has been described as "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" by one of the station's employees (Conrad, 47). This sounds like a man who came to Africa with more than just raping the land for ivory and making a fortune in his mind. Marlow admits that, in light of his revelation that the company's employees seem to be interested in little else besides profits, it would be interesting "to see whether this man (Kurtz), who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all, and how he would set about his work when there" (Conrad, 55). Before knowing the answer to this question, however, Marlow must journey up the river to Kurtz's station. Along the way, increasingly isolated from human contact, the steamship captain has one more important revelation about the world.

As these thoughts of the "civilized" world's ills dawn on Marlow, he realizes some positive aspects in the "savages" that crew his steamer. Conrad's protagonist marvels at the cannibals in his crew for their self-control when their food supply is

thrown overboard by a group of white men who find the stench of rotten hippo meat unbearable:

> Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exits where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. (Conrad, 71)

Although he cannot pinpoint the source, Marlow realizes that some bond beyond personal motivations must keep the cannibals from turning on the other people aboard the steamer. Some unknown collective ties holds these men back, a belief powerful enough to overcome the desires created by slow starvation.

Although Marlow can think of no reason for the cannibals to exercise such strong self-control, they put aside the hunger in their stomachs. The narrator admits that he "would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling a battlefield" (Conrad, 71). According to European thinking these men are savages. They eat the flesh of other people so they must lack ethics. Yet, here they are, showing more moral fiber than the white men who are invading the river to pillage the countryside and make their fortunes. Marlow expresses the implications of this realization when he states, "I perceived – in a new light, as it were – how unwholesome the pilgrims looked" (Conrad, 71). "Pilgrim" is Marlow's pet name for the ivory traders taking passage on his steamer up the river. His statement shows that he realizes these merchants act with little concern for the well being of others. Next to cannibals, these folk appear "unwholesome." These men, already described as thieves, are so interested in ivory that Marlow states, "You would

think they were praying to it" (Conrad, 44). The European traders' devotion to making themselves a fortune outweighs all consideration for others. In realizing this, Marlow shows that he is capable of abstract thought. Isolation on the river is opening his mind to a new understanding of society. Like Hester and Edna's revelations about the oppression of women in their respective worlds, Marlow's removal from European influences allows him to see the bias with which the western world characterizes the natives of colonial lands.

Marlow's growing awareness of the fallacies in Western views of Africa's natives does not come instantly. This insight comes to him in stages as he moves farther up the river, away from the influence of the cities and trading posts of Europe. Earlier in his narrative, before his revelation about the cannibal's restraint, Marlow describes the effect journeying into the wilderness has upon him, and the thoughts this voyage provokes:

> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. (Conrad, 63)

Here, Marlow describes the process of untangling himself from the beliefs of others and forming his own, independent thoughts to take their place. The slow suspicion of his similarity to the natives along the river represents this progression. According to the

imperialist dogma of western civilization, these men are primitive beasts driven by instinct. Thus, the mere suggestion that they might be something other than "inhuman" represents a departure from European thinking by Marlow. Like Hester, who had difficulty accepting her first thoughts that challenged Puritan principles, Marlow's initial criticisms of European thinking come slowly and with some uneasiness. Regardless of the discomfort these thoughts may cause, Marlow is beginning to construct an independent awareness of the world around him. Little by little, the steamer captain is casting off the constraints of cultural beliefs and forming his own views of the world.

The narrator's statement about seeing the earth as "monstrous and free" rather than as a "conquered monster" illustrates the distance separating him from Edwardian England. The wilderness along the river provides a stark contrast to the cities, industries, and agricultural fields that dominate the landscape of England, or Belgium. This isolation from western influences allows Marlow to form thoughts that oppose the attitudes and taboos of these societies. According to the narrator, such seclusion from society reveals, "truth stripped of its cloak of time" (Conrad, 63). The solitude offered by his voyage up the river allows Marlow to see the world without the shroud that civilizations have placed upon it for centuries.

When he finally reaches Kurtz, Marlow discovers the effects of isolation can have detrimental consequences as well as enlightening benefits. The steamer captain shows a suspicion of truth's dual-nature just before reaching Kurtz's station. Conrad's narrator states that he wants to see Kurtz in order to appreciate this fellow's "gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable

darkness" (Conrad, 79). This statement reveals Marlow's understanding of the dangers of being left entirely to one's own devices. A man's capacity to know his true desires and goals – to truly comprehend the forces that motivate him without the influence of others – can be a perilous. The expression of this truth may have the power to enlighten others with the benefits of seeing the world from a new perspective, or it may lead to despair and anguish as one realizes the emptiness of his life. If the soul does not possess strength enough to overcome the weight of these revelations and progress through life without the aid of others, then it may come to rely on other avenues of support. This statement also foreshadows what Marlow discovers when he reaches Kurtz.

The reason for Marlow's declaration about powers of expression becomes clear when he finally meets Kurtz. Describing the trader's background, Marlow states, "His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad, 83). This excerpt does more than describe Kurtz's cosmopolitan origins; the statement that "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" tells readers that this man is a construct. Kurtz lacks an independent identity. Rather he consists of bits and pieces of every part of European civilization. He went into Africa filled with the tenets of imperialist thinking, knowing nothing of himself.

One of the ideas that filled Kurtz's head was the notion that Caucasians must seem like gods to the "backwards" people that inhabit the rest of the world because of the technological advancement of Western civilization. Marlow describes one of Kurtz's early papers saying, "He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity'" (Conrad, 83).

Kurtz contends that Europeans have progressed so much farther as a culture than the inhabitants of the lands they colonize, and that the whites must seem to possess divine powers. Essentially, since Westerners have guns, cities, and steamships, they are superior to the indigenous peoples of the lands they invade.

Isolated at his station, Kurtz must have placed himself in this divine role. When Marlow meets the enigmatic ivory trader, he learns that Kurtz speaks as though the countryside, even the world itself, belongs solely to him. "'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my –' everything belonged to him" Marlow says, "Everything belonged to him – but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own...He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (Conrad, 81). This passage reveals several aspects of Kurtz's character. First, he has succumbed so entirely to the belief that Europeans are superior to natives that he thinks that he, as a white, can actually serve as a sort of deity. The entire world, in his mind, belongs to him; he has dominion over it all. Second, Kurtz actually has control over nothing; in fact, he is subject to the "powers of darkness" that have claimed him. Finally, Kurtz has fallen. A man described as "one of the devils of the land" certainly does not represent the pinnacle of his peer's expectations.

More evidence of Kurtz's fall can be seen in the trade manager's description of his former prodigy after meeting with him at the station, "He is very low, very low...We have done all we could for him – haven't we? But there is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action" (Conrad, 101). The manager's proclamation shows Kurtz's fall from graces in European society. The Imperialistic thinking represented by the

"Company" desires only profit, and Kurtz has made a large section of Africa unprofitable. The manager's description "He is very low, very low" strengthens the impression that Kurtz has plummeted from the position he formerly held as a man who might one day run the Company.

Marlow undergoes a similar fall when he responds to the manager's condemnation of Kurtz with "Nevertheless, I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man" (Conrad, 101). Describing the manager's response, Marlow says, "He started, dropped on me a cold heavy glance, said very quietly, 'He *was*' and turned his back on me. My hour of favor was over" (Conrad, 101). The manager's aloofness suggests his steamer captain's plunge from approval with his defense of Kurtz. Marlow demonstrates an understanding of his fall when he states, "My hour of favor was over." Like Hester Prynne and Edna Pontellier, Marlow finds himself removed from a culture he once belonged to. He is no longer in the favor of his superiors at the trading company who are driven by greed. Instead, they group Marlow with Kurtz as a proponent of unsound methods, and dangerous ideas.

The reason for Kurtz's descent relates to the state in which he left Europe. As a man who was constructed of pieces from every part of Western civilization, Kurtz had no strength of his own to fall back upon when he became isolated from the society that has supported him through life. Marlow describes the effects of isolation in the African wilderness on Kurtz saying, "I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core" (Conrad, 95). Removed from the ideas of

western culture that went into making him, Kurtz perceives aspects of his own nature that he has never realized before. He sees that there is no individuality in his soul to fall back upon. He is a construct, just as Marlow's earlier description of Kurtz's origins indicates.

This realization essentially destroys Kurtz. According to Marlow, "his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had – for my sins, I suppose – to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself" (Conrad, 107). Isolated from the world, Kurtz finds new perspective into himself, just as Hester, Edna, and Marlow had previously discovered. Unfortunately for Kurtz, he looks down into darkness. Since he is made up of other people's ideas and beliefs, he finds his soul to be a cavernous abyss when the influences and ideas of others are removed. Marlow can understand this because Kurtz confides in him.

Marlow's experience with the ivory trader allows him to avoid the fate that Kurtz experiences. While the introspective nature of solitude allows Kurtz to see aspects of his own character that drive him mad, this same shocking revelation allows Marlow to see the effects of losing oneself in the image of others without doing so himself. As the steamer captain says, "It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot" (Conrad, 113). Marlow realizes that he has been given the gift of that unique insight offered by isolation, and a total fall from society's values without stepping over the edge himself. He gains the benefits of Kurtz's experiences without having to live them himself. Thus, unlike Hester and Edna who experience the hardships associated with a complete fall from society, Marlow is able to gain the beneficial insight from similar

experiences without actually undergoing any fall of his own. Conrad's narrator and protagonist gains insight into the effects of solitude through Kurtz's trials in the African wilderness. Marlow even experiences the redemption offered by Kurtz's fate without the anguish that Kurtz endured for this triumph.

Kurtz's last words before death are "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 112). An exact interpretation of what Kurtz means with this final whisper is difficult. Marlow explains the cry as "an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!" (Conrad, 114). Using this account, Kurtz's last words serve as a symbol of his redemption. The utter disgust and hopelessness conveyed by his statement represent a realization of how dark his life has become. This acknowledgment shows that Kurtz has finally freed himself entirely from the powers that commanded his soul. The dark ideas that made him strive to reach divine levels of power no longer cling to his soul. This one victory atones, at least intellectually, for all of Kurtz's mistakes through life.

Although Kurtz does not survive to appreciate the benefits of his revelation and redemption, Marlow's insight into Kurtz's experiences allows him to do so. The steamer captain illustrates his insight into his renunciation of the trading Company after Kurtz's death. Instead of going out to view the body, the narrator states, "I remained, and went on with my dinner. I believe I was considered brutally callous. However, I did not eat much. There was a lamp in there – light, don't you know – and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark" (Conrad, 112). This action represents Marlow's final abandonment of European society. The "light" in his cabin symbolizes truth, while the dark outside embodies the fallacies of submission to western beliefs and Imperialistic thinking.

Marlow chooses to ignore the rules of propriety by staying in to eat his dinner, opting to follow his own principles rather than those handed down by others.

Marlow's actions ultimately redeem him in the society that he renounces. At the beginning of Conrad's novel, before recounting his journey up that African river, Marlow is described as "arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembling an idol" (Conrad, 16). After finishing the story, Conrad writes, "Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha" (123). These descriptions of the seaman paint him with a godlike aspect. Unlike Kurtz, who wanted to rule over the land, Marlow ascends to divine heights by discarding the world about him. The distance between himself and European society, indicated by the account that he "sat apart," actually elevates him in the eyes of the culture he rejects. His unique insight into individual and collective motivations provides him with a perspective into human affairs that places him on a spiritual level above that of his peers.

Like Hester Prynne, whose sinful fall and subsequent renunciation of Puritan life teaches her to understand despair so that she could console others, leading to her ultimate redemption from the society she abandoned, Marlow has undergone a journey in which separation from the western world allows him to see the flaws of imperialist thinking. This understanding, gained after renouncing the trading company's personnel and practices elevates the steamer captain to a position of respect when he returns to Europe. Like Edna, whose liberation brings adulation from her peers, Marlow receives a level of wonder from his companions due to the understanding he gains through his journeys in the African wilderness.

Conclusion

A common theme in all these works is the notion that one must isolate himself from the influence of the thoughts and beliefs of others in order to understand himself as an individual. To do this, the intrepid soul must abandon society and the restraints this institution places upon abstract thought. Once the bonds that cultural taboos and ideologies impose on the members of the group are removed, new perspectives on the forces that shape our lives can be found.

In order to attain the level of solitude required to gain such insight, one must undergo a fall that removes him either physically or spiritually from the environment that restrains him. An example of such a descent is recorded in the Old Testament story of Job. This pious fellow loses his place in society as a test of his devotion to the Lord. Isolated from the world he once knew, and faithful in his trust of the Lord, Job is compelled to sever all relationships with the material and, in turn, allowed to glimpse the glory of his creator. The separation this decision creates between the fallen man and the rest of the world allows him to understand his own spirituality far better than he did before his seclusion. This ultimately results in the man's redemption in the eyes of God. Although he regains the success he once enjoyed, Job's life is enhanced through his redemption by God and his spiritual return to earthly paradise, not through the riches or social status he recovers.

Similarly, Hester Prynne, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter undergoes a spiritual journey in which an act of passion forbidden by Puritan beliefs makes her an outcast in colonial New England. Hester learns to challenge the ideologies of the society that punished her and eventually releases herself entirely from any dependence on its

members. This leads her to enlightened views of the downtrodden and oppressed citizens of New England which she shares through her actions and words. The mercy Hester shows to the less fortunate ranks of society redeems her in the eyes of the people who once jeered as she passed.

Kate Chopin's The Awakening also tells the tale of a woman who chooses to find her own way in life. Edna Pontellier's fall comes not by the decree of others, but through her own decision to discover herself as an individual. Abandoning the traditional, possessive, motherly role of women in the Creole culture, Edna learns the exhilaration of independence. She ultimately gains stature among her peers as she shows herself to be a woman capable of leading a life apart from her husband. Unlike Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, who chooses to return to the community that she renounced and teach the lessons she has learned to others who are facing hardship, Chopin's hero decides to leave the world of her past in search of the enlightenment offered by isolation. For Edna, the possibility of losing her autonomy in New Orleans proves too great to endure, and she chooses instead to lose herself in the solitude of the sea.

Finally, Joseph Conrad's narrator Marlow provides another example of the enlightening effects of isolation in Heart of Darkness. The seaman tells the tale of his journey up an African river, which separates him from the influence of European society, just as Hester's sin removes her from the public, and allows him to recognize the fallacies of imperialistic thinking. However, unlike Hester and Edna, who realize the importance of individuality through their own journeys, Marlow sees the effects of dependence on society through the actions of Kurtz, who goes mad when the isolation of the African wilderness allows him to see the hollowness of his soul. Choosing to abandon the culture

that caused this ivory trader's demise, Marlow learns from Kurtz's experiences the importance of finding his own path through life. Marlow's illuminated conscience places him in the position of an idol when he returns to European society.

All these characters, then, undergo a spiritual journey in which a fall isolates them from society. This separation provides a new perspective on the group they were once a part of that causes the fallen to renounce the beliefs and practices of their contemporaries. As they distance themselves from the world, these characters cast off the shackles created by the influence of other people's thoughts and ideologies. Release from these constraints allows the heroes of these stories to look critically at the society they have left behind and form their own opinions of where life should lead, rather than accepting the roles that others have placed upon them.

In spite of the differences in setting and the nature of the journey these characters undergo, each of these stories concludes with a contentment that suggests the significance of individuality. Such a vision contrasts with the misery of protagonists portrayed by Dickens or Zola, with the agonizing death of Flaubert's Emma Bovary whose hopes of romantic bliss are shattered by the presence of material realities, and with the torments of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, whose search for love results in self-annihilation. Hester, Edna, and Marlow emerge as existential heroes who, like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov search for themselves and, in turn, discover the contentment of self-understanding. Every existential voyage varies in setting, circumstances, time, and tone. Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated in the analyses of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Chopin's Edna Pontellier, and Conrad's Marlow, a paradigm of fall, renunciation, and redemption denotes their psychological, philosophical quests that, like the sufferings of Job and the

dilemmas of modern man, end in an insight transcending the illusions created by societal institutions.

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